

# Generations and contexts in the study of continuity and change. The example of fertility declines

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# BUILDING BRIDGES



## *Scholars, History and Historical Demography*

**A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Theo Engelen**

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## Generations and contexts in the study of continuity and change. The example of fertility declines

Ever since the attempts to theorize our thinking about society and its course of development began, the study of continuity and change has been one of the key issues that triggers our curiosity on this subject. As our thinking about society advances, our theories and methodologies develop too. It is perhaps an oversimplification to say that sociological perspectives help to trace how different snapshots of social realities are connected and form a phenomenon at a given time and place, while historical perspectives help to trace this phenomenon retrospectively and connect it to other events across time and place. Either way, each discipline has laid a foundation toolkit to study continuity and change, so as to uncover how we have come to be where we are today. This theoretical and methodological toolkit has been largely adopted and further developed by social science historians and especially historical demographers, where a crucial role has been played by Theo Engelen. Here I continue the debate on continuity and change in demographic behavior that has been prominent throughout the work of Engelen (1987; 1997; 2002; 2003; 2006; 2014; Engelen & Wolf, 2005). By taking this debate further, my aim is to illustrate how some major concepts in history and sociology, namely generations and contexts, may help us to advance our understanding of the continuity and change surrounding the phenomenon of fertility decline

Perhaps one of the most important lessons that studies of fertility declines have taught us is that the demographic transition phenomenon occurs differently between and within societies (see for example: Engelen 1987; 1997; 2006; Greenhalgh, 1995; Szreter 1996). More importantly, it would be mistaken to assume that every society would ultimately witness

this demographic change (Greenhalgh, 1995; Sigle, 2015). When conducting a historical ethnography of fertility declines in Soviet Ukraine, I was faced with the puzzle of why, as compared to Ukraine, in other parts of the world that underwent fertility decline various (configurations of) factors seemed to play a role in this demographic behavior change. For example, oral histories of the post-war fertility declines in Europe, such as in the Netherlands (Hülksen, 2010; Schoonheim, 2005) and Switzerland (Rusterholz, 2017), highlight that in different localities, the diverging role of religion was important for how individuals adopted certain birth control practices and for their views on family size. Scholars working on Britain have found that there social class was associated with the onset of regional fertility declines and subsequent diverging utilization of birth control methods (Fisher, 2006; Szreter, 1996; Szreter & Fisher, 2010). In contrast, I observed that in Ukraine the role of the extended family, specifically the change in practices of family relations as individuals moved to urban areas, seemed to be crucial for how individuals practiced birth control and made their decisions concerning family size (Hilevych, 2016b).

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From the very start, this rough comparison suggests that demographic phenomena are as complex as other social phenomena simply because the former are also part of our social realities. And while each of these factors – whether it is religion, social class, proximity to kin or something else – may seemingly matter more for the changing fertility trends in one locality than another, what seems to be vital is not any of these factors alone. Instead, and as the work of Engelen has also shown (Baud & Engelen, 1997; Engelen, 2002; 2014), constraints and opportunities that are specific to a certain locality connect and situate these factors and, hence, individual lives in relation to one another, in such a way that they later navigate their reproductive decisions in a meaningful way as they see it. Certainly, the lens of continuity and change is just one means of studying fertility declines. Nevertheless, it is a meaningful one when it comes to situating and explaining this phenomenon on a local level. The two concepts examined here, generations and contexts, could be seen as drivers of both continuity and change. However, for the purpose of this essay, I discuss the role of contexts through the lens of communication and how this could help us to grasp the change. In what follows, I discuss the role of generations through the lens of memory and how this can help us to understand how continuities are being maintained. I end with some concluding remarks on how generation and context can be a productive means to shed some light on the locally specific context of constraints and opportunities that may matter for individual reproductive decisions.

To examine different characteristics that may potentially affect fertility behavior, such as class, religion, language and education, is to identify the context that matters for reproductive practices at a specific time and place (Baud & Engelen, 1997; Engelen, 2002). In other words, it means to establish the semantic, material, economic and political boundaries of the constraints and opportunities governing how, when and why individuals decide to and have children (or not), and if so, how many children they have. Alongside this variety of factors that may potentially matter for reproductive choices in one geographical and historical location but not in another, one aspect becomes central for identifying how the context of constraints and opportunities becomes 'translated' into reproductive decisions and practices: communication.

Indeed, communication lies at the core of 'how people do and do not reproduce' (Hopwood, Jones, Kassell, & Secord, 2015, p. 379). Certainly, communication technologies and the knowledge these provide about sex and reproduction overall are key aspects for grasping the differences between, for example, what is knowledge and ignorance when it comes to sex, sexuality, and procreation (Hopwood et al., 2015). In a similar fashion, communication and knowledge are also closely attached to the emergence of authority and expertise (Hopwood et al., 2015), but more importantly to cultural life scripts (Boonstra, Bras, & Derks, 2014; Engelen, 2014), which in combination define constraints and opportunities in a given time and space. At the same time, 'communication is as uncertain and messy as reproduction can sometimes be' (Hopwood et al., 2015, p. 404). This often leads to unpredicted and unplanned changes in individual reproductive lives, which is often conceptualized through a theoretical lens of vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Kreager & Bochow, 2017; Sijpt, 2014). In short, a vital conjuncture is 'the zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential' (Johnson-Hanks, 2017, p. 330). This view of reproduction as spontaneous implies that it is not only technologies of communication, and what is communicated and how, that are important. Who is communicating it and what type of silences, signals and conversations are understood by others and are perceived to be normative should also be included.

Communication through the lens of social interaction became promi-



nent as a structuring context for reproductive behavior half a century ago in the Princeton Fertility Project (Coale, Anderson, & Härm, 1979; Coale & Watkins, 1986), and subsequently in the diffusion approaches to studying fertility behavior which stemmed from it (Bongaarts & Watkins, 1996; Montgomery & Casterline, 1996; Pollak & Watkins, 1993; Watkins, 1991). These approaches were typically suggestive of the impact of socio-cultural structures emerging through everyday interactions that had an impact on fertility behavior and subsequent decline, especially when it came to explaining regional, local or community variations. Similarly to the First Demographic Transition Theory, and later to the Second Demographic Transition Theory, these studies were searching for commonalities surrounding fertility declines and their underlying structures, and in so doing were neglecting the fact that the differences in fertility behavior even within the borders of a single country may sometimes not be explicable by the same set of factors (Ehmer, 2011; Greenhalgh, 1995; Szreter, 1996; 2011).

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However, the Princeton Fertility Project was by no means fruitless: it formed a foundation for focusing on how reproductive behavior is discussed in everyday life, or not discussed, which has important consequences for how we contextualize individual reproductive practices in the study of fertility declines today (Engelen, 2003; Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Kreager & Bochow, 2017; Van der Sijpt, 2011). One of the key figures of the Princeton Fertility Project, Susan Watkins (1990; 1991) suggests that significant people in a person's life, namely parents, friends and neighbors, influence individual reproductive behavior. As her departure point, she takes Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006 [1982]) and she applies it to the study of fertility. By exploring 19th century differences in marriage and childbearing patterns, she shows that these were not only visible on the national level, but also on the regional level. Watkins explains these differences by the fact that the most common factors behind whether an individual belongs to a particular region or community are language, religion, and ethnicity. Engelen (1987) also suggested that fertility behavior operates and is meaningful through 'regional cultures'. In practice, belonging to a certain regional culture may mean that in the process of day-to-day interactions a woman can learn from her mother, older sister or other females how to breastfeed, and in a similar way she could exchange with others her knowledge on abortion or other methods of 'bringing back' menstruation. Similarly, such information could be exchanged through gossip, which is also an important social in-

strument for permitting and approving certain behaviors (Watkins & Danzi, 1995).

480 What Theo Engelen and Susan Watkins described as empirically tangible, Simon Szreter has theorized through the concept of ‘communication communities’. Szreter (1997; 2011; 2015) sees communication communities as entities in their own right, because they are not necessarily formed on the basis of universal rules such as language, religion or class. Individuals may belong to several communication communities over their lifetimes and at specific stages in life. Similarly, while living in different geographic locations and without knowing each other, individuals may still face similar constraints and opportunities with regard to having children (see for example Hilevych & Rusterholz, 2018; Pooley & Qureshi, 2016); this, as well as striving for similar social and cultural goals, could make them participate in the same communication community too. Through this lens, communication communities should be understood as ‘encompassing socio-cultural environments of language, values, and roles in which individuals and families participate and through which they form and negotiate their meanings, goals, and social identities’ (Szreter, 2015, p. 177). In this way, they provide us with “schemas for action and horizon of possibilities through which we navigate conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks, 2017, p. 338) or, in other words, the social contexts of constraints and opportunities within which individuals exercise their agency (Baud & Engelen, 1997; Engelen, 2002).

When it comes to understanding changes in fertility behaviors, it is through communication communities that individuals negotiate, acquire, and reproduce their social and gender identities, and this subsequently has implications for the perceived relative cost of child-rearing (Szreter, 2015). In this sense, the role of communication communities is to mediate reproductive behavior through the means of both verbal and non-verbal communication, including daily routines, unreflective expectations and assumptions, and by simply observing the behaviors of others. This communication aspect is also a central element from which contextual difference between the communities and their sub-populations could emerge.

The next obvious question is how we identify communication communities. This brings us back to the issue of context outlined in the preceding pages, such as, for example, why in some localities religion may seemingly matter more for changing reproductive behavior than social class, language or urbanization, and vice versa. In this respect, understanding who is primarily involved in reproductive decisions (Johnson-Hanks, 2002;

Kreager & Bochow, 2017; Van der Sijpt, 2011) and hence whom the perceived costs of child-rearing primarily impact (Szreter, 1996; 2015) would be the first step toward underpinning the role of context in the study of reproductive behavior change. However, while in some communities having a child could be a shared decision between a husband and wife, it cannot be assumed that this is the sole or primary factor for any locality. This is primarily because power dynamics within a family and even outside it (see Heady, 2007) are crucial here. When looking, for example, into the power dynamics within a family, it could be that the role of childcare is shared between the wife and her mother(-in-law), which would increase their perceived costs of child-rearing and may make them the primary decision-makers, as studies across different localities have also shown (Bernardi & Oppo, 2008; Breengaard, 2016; Hertog, 2016; Rotkirch, 2000; Van der Sijpt, 2011). Let me illustrate this with reference to the example of Soviet Ukraine, where I observed similar child-rearing costs and responsibilities.

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In one of the localities that I studied, I found that a husband was not seen as responsible for reproductive decisions (Hilevych, 2016a), but he was – for birth control (Hilevych, 2015). In turn, reproductive decisions and costs of child-rearing were primarily assumed by the wife, who would often rely on the help of her mother or mother-in-law in these matters. What is important here is that this female-centered childcare arrangement<sup>1</sup> is not new for this locality, since a grandmother has always played a key role in providing childcare here, even prior to the Soviet Union when extended family households were common (Hilevych, 2016b; Kis, 2012). What, however, does seem to make a difference for changing reproductive practices, leading to the limiting of family size, is the response of the female-centered family relations to the Soviet social policies. First of all, the re-legalization of abortion after 1955 certainly played a role in how birth control and childcare became perceived and practiced as two separate decisions; where the first would be a concern of a couple, and the second of a wife and her mother(in-law). More important for how reproductive decisions were made was, however, the introduction and rapid development of a new type of social housing in urban areas, which was primarily aimed at improving the welfare of nuclear families (Hilevych & Rusterholz, 2018). The new living arrangements no longer made it possible for close emotional and geographic proximity between generations to be maintained in the same way as it was in rural areas where several generations would have lived together. Furthermore, many men and women



were moving away from their families of origin to pursue their studies and engage in labor-force participation, sometimes in distant regions. The generations I interviewed, who were mainly born before the Second World War, were the first to experience this urban change. At the same time, many of them still had strong female-centered expectations of help with childcare. These expectations were often hard or even impossible to realize in these new living arrangements. These unmet expectations and the dependency on female-centered help, I argue, triggered the postponement of having a second child by up to 15 years, and sometimes even led to couples having no more children at all. In practice, these decisions led to the emergence of one-child families and subsequently to the phenomenon of the post-war fertility decline in this urban locality (Hilevych, 2016a; 2016b; Hilevych & Rusterholz, 2018).

Intriguingly, in another Ukrainian locality I studied, reproductive decisions were realized in a different way, despite the fact that the aforementioned Soviet social policy was the same. In this locality, the couple were seen as primary decision-makers in matters relating to both birth control and child-rearing. While parents (-in-law) were not key players, they still provided some essential support, especially in the early life-course (Hilevych, 2016b). In this respect, the living arrangements for nuclear families were serving the purpose of satisfying the standard of individual well-being in this context. The perceived costs of child-rearing were equally high for a wife and her husband. Some families practiced a male-breadwinner model until their childbearing intentions were realized and they often employed a shorter birth spacing strategy (up to 5 years). This spacing strategy seems comparable to the families in some Western European localities at that time (Fisher, 2006; Hilevych & Rusterholz, 2018; Rusterholz, 2017). Importantly, labor force participation for men and women was compulsory in the Soviet Union, which often implied that the male-breadwinner model was hard to realize in practice. As such, it was more common for spouses in this locality to share their responsibilities for child-rearing by equally distributing both childcare costs and participation in the labor force, while in terms of power dynamics a husband would often be in charge. Furthermore, although religion was officially banned in the Soviet Union, in this locality religion seems to have an impact on how abortion was practiced. Religion was seen less in relation to abortion as a woman's guilt, but rather in relation to the practice of abortion and contraception as a responsibility for procreation which was shared by both spouses (Hilevych, 2015).

While the reproductive realities in the two localities may seem to be specific to the Soviet Ukrainian contexts, they also illustrate two important and perhaps more general aspects of how ‘communication as a context’ matters for changes in reproductive behavior. First, they illustrate that when constraints and opportunities change, it primarily impacts those involved in reproductive decision-making, in other words, those whom the perceived costs of child-rearing specifically impact. As such, the key agents involved in reproductive decisions would be more inclined to find a new strategy for coping with the change before reaching out for help and support from other members in the family or community. In such a case, one may suggest that when a husband and wife are key agents in reproductive decisions, they may be more likely to reach out for help and communicate about these matters with other members of the community, namely the people to whom they are more likely to relate to, whether in terms of a shared religion, language, social class or kin/origin (see, for example, Heady, 2017). At the same time, when the key agents in reproductive decisions are a woman and her mother, sister or other relative, the situation can be more complex as intra-familial power dynamics would identify who actually makes the ultimate decision, and this may not necessarily be the woman who is actually carrying the child. Second, once the decision-making agents are identified, it may be easier to understand the role of the structural factors that matter for reproductive practices, such as the availability and use of childcare facilities, birth control, and parental leave, as well as women’s educational attainment and full-time labor force participation. Altogether, these eventually create the context that is meaningful for reproductive behavior change as it is communicated between those who are involved in it.

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#### UNDERSTANDING THE CONTINUITY: GENERATIONS AND THEIR CULTURAL MEMORY

As suggested above, the role of elder generations could be as important in reproductive decisions as that of spouses, i.e. biological parents. In fact, up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term generation was used to discuss procreation and descent in scientific literature, after which these processes became framed through the lens of reproduction (Hopwood, Flemming & Kassell, 2018). In current discourses, reproduction is seen a process that involves generations, which are among the “principal, flexible cultural re-

sources on which men and women draw in making sense of their lives” (Pooley & Qureshi, 2016, p. 4). Here, generations should be seen in broader terms – as individuals who are both related and unrelated by their descent. To understand the role of generations in reproductive decisions implies the uncovering of how the knowledge of one generation, formed in a specific context, is passed on to the subsequent generation(s), where meanwhile the context of constraints and opportunities may have already changed. In this light, a generation could be seen as one of the key actors enacting change, as well as producing degrees and patterns of continuity (Bernardi, 2013) through which cultures of reproduction are communicated (Pooley & Qureshi, 2016).

484 To understand how reproductive norms, values and behaviors are communicated, exchanged and maintained across and between generations, as well as communication communities more generally, contemporary studies in the social sciences and humanities try to identify specific ways in which norms, values and behaviors are transmitted intergenerationally. Probably the most conventional way of thinking about intergenerational transmission, primarily between relatives, is through identifying the underlying mechanisms. Some mechanisms are more direct, such as socialization (for values and norms), while others are more indirect, such as role modeling, and mechanisms that could be mediated by behavior, such as the inheritance of status (Bernardi, 2016). An alternative way of looking at transmission is by applying the lens through which we see reproduction: both generation and reproduction could be seen as a process rather than a mere outcome (quoted from Bloch, 2005 in Pooley & Qureshi, 2016, p. 21). Among such processes of transmission, we might find (for example) implicit normative expectations, moral judgment, habituation, and memory (see for further details Pooley & Qureshi, 2016). Each of these processes is highly interlinked with others and, similarly to the first approach, this perspective also suggests the ways in which generations can ‘communicate’. Among these processes, the notion of memory particularly stands out, as it also allows us to account for generation in its broader meaning, which not only includes parents and children, but also unrelated others who constitute the broader communication community.

One may define individual memory as an implicit way of thinking about the “dialogue between a person’s past, present and future self” (Pooley & Qureshi, 2016, p. 29). The stories of generations comparing their parenting values to those of their parents, as they remember them, would be a prominent example here (Bernardi, 2013; Hilevych & Rusterholz,

2018; Pooley & Qureshi, 2016). But what about memories of the whole generation that are being passed down through experiences? Can we grasp those? And if so, what impact do they have on the reproductive behaviors of subsequent generations? This question is especially pertinent because it is not a straightforward one that solely concerns intergenerational transmission as a process, but it also concerns the knowledge of a specific context of constraints and opportunities that is being transferred. In this respect one may think about specific reproductive technologies and population policies that are aimed at enabling and suppressing reproduction, and how these are being ‘translated’, by a generation that witnessed them, to the next generations.

Perhaps in the contexts where fertility declines happened recently, these ways of ‘translating’ could be identified by simply talking to people (Szreter, 2011). At the same time, as societies witness certain changes, they may remember them by making this change meaningful in their own lives. This process is also known as cultural memory (Assmann, 2010). Some even suggest that one should think of culture as a memory (Assmann, 2010) because what generations remember from their history creates the context of culture as they pass it down. Through this lens, “cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours’” (Assmann, 2010, p. 113), which in other words means that cultural memory is a ‘received history’ (cited from Young, 1997 in Hirsch & Smith, 2002, p. 9).

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To understand reproductive practices through the lens of cultural memory means to understand how a certain context of constraints and opportunities that is meaningful for one generation is being transferred and ‘translated’ to another generation. For example, in both of the aforementioned Ukrainian localities, abortion became freely available in 1955 under the general Soviet abortion re-legalization law. However, in one locality, which became part of the Soviet Union in 1919 and which witnessed the first legalization of abortion in the world in 1921 (1922 in Ukraine), women whom I interviewed remembered and internalized the possibility of abortion as an option for when childbearing was too cost-intensive (Hilevych, 2015). When they themselves were growing up, these women also heard the stories of abortions taking place in their family or among neighbors. When these women were becoming mothers, they also saw, and discussed with other women, the possibility of abortion. In contrast, in another locality, the 1955 legalization was the first time when all the generations experienced free access to abortion. At the same time, some of the women I

interviewed did not know that abortion was legal after 1955 and they sought it from outside the official medical institutions. Although clandestine abortions were often performed by the same physicians as in the hospitals, these practices were officially illegal. For these women, abortion was a less desired option. Neither was freely available abortion a part of the cultural memory in the locality (Hilevych, 2015). To an even greater extent, abortion was still associated with as a back-street practice to be acquired only in extreme situations.

486 For a similar, more recent example of how certain constraints and opportunities are 'translated' to the next generation, one may think of the relaxation of the one-child policy in China. A study by Breengaard (2016) of one urban Chinese locality shows that the first two generations that witnessed this change rationalized and passed down the positive impact of the one-child policy to the next generations: namely, that both parents and grandparents can provide more care to one child. This intensive support from grandparents also allowed many men and women to engage in full-time labor force participation. In practice, however, this often implied that when the second generation became grandparents themselves, they would have fewer possibilities of providing the same type of child care to their children due to their lack of child-rearing skills. However, as Breengaard (2016) illustrates, the belief that one-child families provide better well-being to their children than the previous generations still persists and it is being 'translated' in this way to young couples.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, how can the two aforementioned aspects – 'communication as a context' and 'cultural memory of generations' – be meaningful for the study of continuity and change? In the same way that each of them can be a lens on its own, I suggest that they also inform each other in a meaningful way when looked at together. 'Communication as a context' is more than just a mere study of social interactions, who communicates with whom and what information they exchange. However, from the very beginning these elements are crucial for uncovering how and why individuals connect to each other in a certain way, and why sometimes they perceive and interpret the same constraints and opportunities in a different way, and vice versa. If considered from a social perspective, one may also say that these underlying structures that cause people to connect in a certain way are

actually what makes culture. Cultural memory could be conceived of as this common ground, especially when it comes to understanding the impact of recent social policies and introduction of new technologies on social change, and how these become adopted and internalized (or not) by different sub-populations. In the same way that the process of internalizing new norms and values around reproduction may continue across many generations by means of transferring cultural memory, generations may also forget the past, if it is not meaningful to them. As such, the concept of cultural memory helps to identify important key points in history that are meaningful for reproductive decisions in a specific locality. In this respect, cultural memory becomes a means to transfer and 'translate' a context of constraints and opportunities from one generation to another. Finally, these ways of 'translating' can produce new social inequalities and reproduce old ones, which we as sociologists and historians ultimately aim to uncover in our works by employing the lens of continuity and change to study demographic and social phenomena.

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1. Bernardi & Oppo (2008) also found this type of family arrangements in Southern Italy, Rotkirch (2000) defined it as 'extended mothering' in Russia, and in evolutionary theory in evolutionary theory this type of arrangement is given as an example of the general phenomenon of humans being 'cooperative breeders' (Hrdy, 2011).